

# Gore Vidal Pages

## Gore Vidal's address, "Monotheism and its Discontents"

**"(The Great Unmentionable) Monotheism and its Discontents," The Lowell Lecture, Harvard University, April 20, 1992:**

It is very easy to discuss what has gone wrong with us. It is not so easy to discuss what should be done to correct what has gone wrong. It is impossible in our public discourse to discuss why so much has gone wrong and, indeed, has been wrong with us since the very beginning of the country, and even before that when our white tribes were living elsewhere.

Unfortunately, there are two subjects that we are never permitted to discuss with any seriousness: race and religion, and how our attitudes toward the first are rooted in the second. Thanks to this sternly — correctly? — enforced taboo, we are never able to get to the root of our problems. We are like people born in a cage and unable to visualize any world beyond our familiar bars of prejudice and superstition. That Opinion the Few create in order to control the Many has seen to it that we are kept in permanent ignorance of our actual estate. Even so, a number of prisoners are testing the bars. Some actually got loose in Los Angeles, for a weekend [during the 1992 Los Angeles Riots]. The wardens are alarmed. The two trustees they are offering us are not acceptable to the restive prison population, while out of Texas, now strides a small but imperfectly formed man, differently, gloriously advantaged size-wise, and in his tiny paw, there is — no, it can't be but yes, it looks very like — a key. Oh, Ross [Perot], free at last! Failing that, build us a better, more prisoner-friendly cage.



A political analyst wrote at the time of the New Hampshire primary that the two irrelevant candidates for President this year, Jerry Brown and Pat Buchanan, should leave the field to the heavyweights — like Bush and Clinton. As the media are a large part of the mess that we are in, the journalist — deliberately? — got it wrong. Brown and Buchanan were the only substantive, relevant and representative — in the best and worst senses — candidates on display. So let us brood on them and what it is that they represent in the way of race and religion, the two root issues.

The word "radical" derives from the Latin word for root. Therefore, if you want to get to the root of anything you must be radical. It is no accident that the word has now been totally demonized by our masters, and no one in politics dares even use the word favorably, much less track any problem to its root. But then a ruling class that was able to demonize the word "liberal" in the past ten years is a master at controlling — indeed stifling — any criticism of itself. "Liberal" comes from the Latin liberalis, which means pertaining to a free man. In politics, to be liberal is to want to extend democracy through change and reform. One can see why that word had to be erased from our political lexicon.

Meanwhile, the word "isolationist" has been revived to describe those who would like to put an end to the national security state that replaced our Republic a half-century ago while extending the American military empire far beyond our capacity to pay for it. The word was trotted out this year to describe Pat Buchanan, when he was causing great distress to the managers of our national security state by saying that America must abandon the empire if we are ever to repair the mess at home. Also, as a neo-isolationist, Buchanan must be made to seem an anti-Semite. This is not hard to do. Buchanan is a classic Archie Bunker type, seething with irrational prejudices and resentments, whose origin I'll get to presently.

The country is now dividing, as it did a half-century ago, between those who think that America comes first versus those who favor empire and the continued exertion of force everywhere in the name of democracy, something not much on display here at home. In any case, as the whole world is, more or less, a single economic unit in which the United States is an even smaller component, there are no isolationists today. But the word games go on and the reversals of meaning are always a sign that our corporate masters are worried that the people are beginning to question their arrangements. Many things are now coming into focus. *The New York Times* promptly dismissed Buchanan as a minor irritant, which was true, but it ignored his

potentially major constituency — those who now believe that it was a mistake to have wasted, since 1950, most the government's revenues on war.

Jerry Brown alarmed the *Times* even more than Buchanan did. There was the possibility that he could be elected. More important, he might actually change our politics in the sense of who pays for whom. In a sudden frenzy, the *Times* compared him to [Argentine dictator Juan] Peron — our Jerry? — a dangerous demagogue whose "sharp edged anger...resonates among a variety Americans." Plainly, the ownership of the country is frightened that the current hatred of politicians, in general, may soon be translated into hatred of that corporate few who control the many through Opinion, as manufactured by the *Times*, among others.

Now to the root of the matter. The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved — Judaism, Christianity, Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal — God is the omnipotent father — hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates. The sky-god is a jealous god, of course. He requires total obedience from everyone on earth, as he is in place not for just one tribe but for all creation. Those who would reject him must be converted or killed for their own good. Ultimately, totalitarianism is the only sort of politics that can truly serve the sky-god's purpose. Any movement of a liberal nature endangers his authority and that of his delegates on earth. One God, one King, one Pope, one master in the factory, one father-leader in the family home.

The founders of the United States were not enthusiasts of the sky-god. Many, like Jefferson, rejected him altogether and placed man at the center of the world. The young Lincoln wrote a pamphlet against Christianity, which friends persuaded him to burn. Needless to say, word got around about both Jefferson and Lincoln and each had to cover his tracks. Jefferson said he was a deist, which could mean anything or nothing, while Lincoln, hand on heart and tongue in cheek, said he could not support for office anyone who "scoffed" at religion.

From the beginning, sky-godders have always exerted great pressure in our secular republic. Also, evangelical Christian groups have traditionally drawn strength from the suppressed. African slaves were allowed to organize heavenly sky-god churches, as a surrogate for earthly freedom. White churches were organized in order to make certain that the rights of property were respected and that the numerous religious taboos in the New and Old Testaments would be enforced, if necessary, by civil law. The ideal to which John Adams subscribed — that we should be a nation of laws, not of men — was quickly subverted when the churches forced upon everyone, through supposedly neutral and just laws, their innumerable taboos on sex, alcohol, gambling. We are now indeed a nation of laws, mostly bad and certainly anti-human.

Roman Catholic migrations in the last century further re-enforced the Puritan sky-god. The Church has also put itself on a collision course with the Bill of Rights when it asserts as it always has, that "error has no rights." The last correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson expressed their alarm that the Jesuits were to be allowed into the United States. Although the Jews were sky-god folk, they followed Book One, not Book Two, so they have no mission to convert others; rather the reverse. Also, as they have been systematically demonized by the Christian sky-godders, they tended to be liberal and so turned not to their temple but to the A.C.L.U. Unfortunately, the recent discovery that the sky-god, in his capacity as realtor, had given them, in perpetuity, some parcels of unattractive land called Judea and Samaria has, in my mind, unhinged many of them. I hope this is temporary.

In the First Amendment to the Constitution the Founders made it clear that this was not to be a sky-god nation with a national religion like that of England, from whom we had just separated. It is curious how little understood this amendment is — yes, everyone has a right to worship any god he chooses but he does not have the right to impose his beliefs on others who do not happen to share in his superstitions and taboos. This separation was absolute in our original Republic. But the sky-godders do not give up easily. In the 1950s they actually got the phrase "In God We Trust" onto the currency, in direct violation of the First Amendment.

Although many of the Christian evangelists feel it necessary to convert everyone on earth to their primitive religion, they have been prevented — so far — from forcing others to worship as they do but they have forced — most tyrannically and wickedly — their superstitions and hatreds upon all of us through the civil law and through general prohibitions. So it is upon account that I now favor an all-out war on the monotheists.

Let us dwell on the evils they have wrought. The hatred of blacks comes straight from their Bad Book. As descendants of Ham, blacks are forever accursed, while Saint Paul tells the slaves to obey their masters. Racism is in the marrow of the bone of the

true believer. For him, black is forever inferior to white and deserves whatever ill fortune may come his way. The fact that some monotheists can behave charitably means, often, that their prejudice is at so deep a level that they are not aware it is there at all. In the end, this makes any radical change of attitude impossible. Meanwhile, welfare has been the price the sky-goddess were willing to pay to exclude blacks from their earthly political system. So we must live — presumably forever — with a highly enervating race war, set in train by the One God and his many hatreds.

Patriarchal rage at the thought of Woman ever usurping Man's place at the helm, in either home or workplace, is almost as strong now as it ever was. According to the polls at the time of the hearing, most American women took the word of [then-nominee to the US Supreme Court] Clarence Thomas against Anita Hill [who testified against Thomas's appointment]. But then the sky-god's fulminations against women are still very much part of the psyche of those in thrall to the Jealous God.

The ongoing psychopathic hatred of same-sexuality has made the United States the laughingstock of the civilized world. In most of the First World, monotheism is weak. Where it is weak or nonexistent, private sexual behavior has nothing to do at all with those not involved, much less the law. At least when the Emperor Justinian, a sky-god man, decided to outlaw sodomy, he had to come up with a good practical reason, which he did. It is well known, Justinian declared, that buggery is a principal cause of earthquakes, and so must be prohibited. But our sky-goddess, always eager to hate, still quote Leviticus, as if that loony text had anything useful to say about anything except, perhaps, the inadvisability of eating shellfish in the Jerusalem area.

We are now, slowly, becoming alarmed at the state of the planet. For a century, we have been breeding like a virus under optimum conditions, and now the virus has begun to attack its host, the earth. The lower atmosphere is filled with dust, we have just been told from our satellites in space. Climate changes; earth and water are poisoned. Sensible people grow alarmed, but sky-goddess are serene, even smug. The planet is just a staging area for heaven. Why bother to clean it up? Unfortunately for everyone, George Bush's only hope of winning in the coming election is to appeal to the superstitious. So at Rio [in 1992 at the Earth Summit] he refused to commit our government to the great cleanup, partly because it would affect the incomes of the 100 corporate men and women who pay for him but largely because of the sky-god, who told his slaves to "be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion...over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." Well, we did just like you told us, massa. We've used everything up. We're ready for heaven now. Or maybe Mars will do.

Ordinarily, as a descendant of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which shaped our Republic, I would say live and let live and I would try not to "scoff" — to use Lincoln's verb — at the monotheists. But I am not allowed to ignore them. They won't let me. They are too busy. They have a divine mission to take away our rights as private citizens. We are forbidden abortion here, gambling there, same-sex almost everywhere, drugs, alcohol in a dry county. Our prisons are the most terrible and the most crowded in the First World. Our death row executions are a source of deep disgust in civilized countries, where more and more we are regarded as a primitive, uneducated and dangerous people. Although we are not allowed, under law, to kill ourselves or to take drugs that good folk think might be bad for us, we are allowed to buy a handgun and shoot as many people as we can get away with.

Of course, as poor Arthur (There is This Pendulum) Schlesinger Jr. would say, these things come in cycles. Every twenty years liberal gives way to conservative, and back again. But I suggest that what is wrong now is not cyclic but systemic. And our system, like any system, is obeying the second law of thermodynamics. Everything is running down; and we are well advanced along the yellow brick road to entropy. I don't think much of anything can be done to halt this progress under our present political-economic system. We lost poor Arthur's pendulum in 1950 when our original Constitution was secretly replaced with the apparatus of the national security state, which still wastes most of our tax money on war related matters. Hence deteriorating schools, and so on.

Another of our agreed-upon fantasies is that we do not have a class system in the United States. The Few who control the Many though Opinion have simply made themselves invisible. They have convinced us that we are a classless society in which anyone can make it. Ninety percent of the stories in the pop press are about winners of lotteries or poor boys and girls who, despite adenoidal complaint, become overnight millionaire singers. So there is still hope, the press tells the folks, for the 99 percent who will never achieve wealth no matter how hard they work. We are also warned at birth that it is not polite to hurt people's feelings by criticizing their religion, even if that religion may be damaging everyone through the infiltration of our common laws.

Happily, the few cannot disguise the bad times through which we are all going. Word is spreading that America is now falling behind in the civilization sweepstakes. So isn't it time to discuss what we all really think about our social and economic arrangements?

Although we may not discuss race other than to say that Jesus wants each and every one of us for a sunbeam, history is nothing more than the bloody record of the migration of tribes. When the white race broke out of Europe 500 years ago, it did many astounding things all over the globe. Inspired by a raging sky-god, the whites were able to pretend that their conquests were in order to bring the One God to everyone, particularly those with older and subtler religions. Now the tribes are on the move again.

Professor Pendulum is having a nervous breakdown because so many different tribes are being drawn to this sweet land of liberty and, thus far, there is no indication that any of the new arrivals intends ever to read *The Age of Jackson*. I think the taking in of everyone can probably be overdone. There may not be enough jobs for very many more immigrants, though what prosperity we have ever enjoyed in the past was usually based on slave or near-slave labor.

On the other hand, I think Asians, say, are a plus culturally, and their presence tends to refocus, somewhat, the relentless white versus black war. Where I am as one with friend Pendulum is that the newcomers must grasp certain principles as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. Otherwise, we shall become a racially divided totalitarian state enjoying a Brazilian economy.

To revert to the unmentionable, religion. It should be noted that religion seemed to be losing its hold in the United States in the second quarter of this century. From the Scopes trial in '25 to the repeal of Prohibition in '33, the sky-godders were confined pretty much to the backwoods. Then television was invented and the electronic pulpit was soon occupied by a horde of Elmer Ganttrys, who took advantage of the tax exemption for religion. Thus, out of greed, a religious revival has been set in motion and the results are predictably poisonous to the body politic.

It is usual, on the rare occasions when essential problems are addressed, to exhort everyone to be kinder, gentler. To bring us together, O Lord, in our common humanity. Well, we have heard these exhortations for a couple of hundred years and we are further apart than ever. So instead of coming together in order that the many might be one, I say let us separate so that each will know where he stands. From the one, many, and each of us free of the sky-god as secular lawgiver. I preach, to put it bluntly, confrontation.

Brown and Buchanan, whether they knew it or not, were revealing two basic, opposing political movements. Buchanan speaks for the party of God — the sky-god with his terrible hatred of women, blacks, gays, drugs, abortion, contraception, gambling — you name it, he hates it. Buchanan is a worthy peddler of hate. He is also in harmony not only with the prejudices and superstitions of a good part of the population but, to give him his due, he is a reactionary in the good sense — reacting against the empire in favour of the old Republic, which he mistakenly thinks was Christian.

Brown speaks for the party of man — feminists can find another noun if they like. Thomas Paine, when asked his religion, said he subscribed only to the religion of humanity. There now seems to be a polarising of the country of a sort that has never happened before. The potential fault line has always been there, but whenever a politician got too close to the facts of our case, the famed genius of the system would eliminate him in favour of that mean which is truly golden for the ownership, and no one else. The party of man would like to re-establish a representative government firmly based upon the Bill of Rights. The party of God will have none of this. It wants to establish, through legal prohibitions and enforced taboos, a sky-god totalitarian state. The United States ultimately as prison, with mandatory blood, urine and lie-detector tests and with sky-godders as cops, answerable only to God, who may have just sent us his Only Son, H. Ross Perot as warden.

For once, it's all out there, perfectly visible, perfectly plain for those who can see. That Brown and Buchanan will not figure in the election does not alter the fact that, for the first time in 140 years, we now have, due in part to their efforts, the outline of two parties. Each knows the nature of its opposite, and those who are wise will not try to accommodate or compromise the two but will let them, at last, confront each other.


The famous tree of liberty is all that we have ever really had. Now, for want of nurture, it is dying before our eyes. Of course, the sky-godder never liked it. But some of did — and some of us do. So, perhaps, through facing who and what we are, we may achieve a nation not under God but under man — or should I say our common humanity?

Photo: Gore Vidal, 1992

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